The Center That Holds

Southern Literature & The Oldtime Religion

By Donald Davidson

During a chilly week in March while winter still threatened, I bethought myself that it was Lent and that I ought to choose some readings proper to the lean and crabbed season. What would best mortify my too, too Southern flesh? What would be The Great Society's equivalent of a medieval hair-shirt? The decision was easy. I picked out the most uncomfortable chair in the house and, sitting puritanically upright, began once more to read the *new* Southern historians—those of the so-called "Revisionist" School. I was looking for a suitable kind of pain—and pretty soon I got it. But, after all, this was no new experience for a Southerner—to be told for the hundredth time that Confederate heroes might sometimes be less than heroic or that the Reconstruction period was not—not *really*—the "Tragic Era," but was instead a kind of lovely prologue to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. I began to yawn and would soon have fallen asleep if I had not stumbled upon Mr. C. Vann Woodward's essay, "The Historical Dimension," and found him saying in his very first sentence that it is "high time for some historian ... to make his bow to Southern men of letters." A little further on I read this: "What is really needed is some acknowledgment of the genuine debt the historians owe to the poets, playwrights, and novelists ... [of the contemporary South]." What a sensation! To find one of the most revisionist of the Southern revisionist historians tossing bouquets instead of brickbats at the new Southern literature! It was a miracle! It was almost as if Ralph McGill should suddenly come out for

segregation. Was Mr. Woodward, then, defecting from the Southern Liberals? Was he rejoining the Confederate States?

That would be saying too much. Nevertheless, the little book in which Mr. Woodward publishes his sensational essay—a book called *The Burden of Southern History*—is dedicated to Robert Penn Warren, who is not only a member of the "Fugitive Group" of Southern poets, but bears the additional stigma (to a Liberal eye) of being, or at least having been, one of the twelve Southern "Agrarians" who in 1930 contributed to *I'll Take My Stand*. Mr. Warren's contribution was a very thoughtful Southern essay on the Negro's problems in a highly industrialized civilization. In his own essay, Mr. Woodward agrees with Allen Tate about the cause of the South's recent success in literature. The basic cause, he says, is in "the peculiarly historical consciousness of the Southern writer." That historical consciousness, Mr. Woodward thinks, "is the secret spring of creative energies that has fed the whole literary movement in the South during the last three decades." That is what differentiates Southern writers—and the South itself—from the rest of the country. People in the novels of Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis "appear from nowhere, trailing no clouds of history, dissociated from the past." In the novels of Hemingway, the lack of historical sense or even historical perspective is even more marked. The Hemingway characters "are invariably pictured as expatriates, as wanderers, as soldiers or adventurers… A Hemingway hero with a grandfather is inconceivable."

But to read the new Southern writers, beginning in the nineteen-thirties, was "to enter upon a new world of the imagination, a world in which the historical imagination played a supreme part." When Mr. Woodward uses the term "historical imagination," I am sure he is not referring to the "historical novel," or not to that alone. He is referring—and I am certainly referring—to an all-pervasive quality, to the quality of the creative mind of poet or novelist or

dramatist as it approaches any subject, the contemporary subject no less than the subject that comes from the near past or the distant past.

And this is a quality of the new Southern literature that I wish briefly to explore with you. I offer it not merely as a characteristic of the new Southern literature, but I also affirm it, once it is properly described, as a principle of art in every field of art and indeed as a principle of life. I am glad to have Mr. Woodward's declaration as a sort of visa on my Southern literary passport, if such is needed. But the country that we now enter is my native own, and yours, as much as his. I hope you will indulge me if I now once more fit to my bowstring an arrow or two that I shot sixteen years ago.

In 1950, at a meeting of the Southern Literary Festival at Mississippi State College, I said, in effect, that the historical consciousness of the Southern writer is indeed one of the notable features of the traditional society that has continued to survive, even to flourish, in the South, while in the North and West, it has been destroyed or stifled by the complete dominance of science, industrialism, and materialism—which are features of the anti-traditional or so-called progressive society, In a traditional society the present is continuous with the past. The connection of present with past is far richer than is represented by the logical sequence that a historian may seek to discover and to document. Affection, kinship, piety, and above all, religious belief shape the long continuities of time and place in transcendent memory.

In contrast, modern progressive society insists more and more upon discontinuity. Each day, calendared and clocked, in terms of mere logical convenience, destroys its yesterday and, in its turn, is destroyed by its tomorrow. Persons become functions of the progressive whirl—specialists, pieces of men. Despite its humanitarian professions and idealistic promises, the anti-traditional society has some highly dangerous, if not deadly, features: for example, its rapid, ever-accelerating rate of change, its self-destructiveness, irresponsibility, vulgarity, disorder, its tendency to large-scale

wreckage and brutality. But let me describe the traditional society as I described it in Mississippi, sixteen years ago, with particular reference to the Southern writer:

> The person who is born of a traditional society, if he is not corrupted, will act as a whole person in all his acts, including his literary acts. The truth of experience that fills his emotional being is not at war with the truth of his intellectual judgments, but the two, as he writes, are one. His apprehension of this subject matter, which is intuitive and comes from "knowledge carried to the heart," moves hand in hand with his composition, which derives from his intellectual judgment, his sense of fitness and order. Thus an act as cold-blooded—as deliberate literary composition must be—is redeemed and assisted by the warm-blooded knowledge of the heart. It is natural for a Southerner to compose in this way...
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> It is also natural for him to see men in their total capacity as persons and to see things in all their rich particularity as things and to understand that the relationships between persons and persons, and between persons and things, are more complex and more unpredictable than any scientific textbook invites one to think... His traditional society has taught him to look at the world in such a way. It has also impressed upon him that the world is both good and evil. Toward nature, toward his fellow creatures, toward the historic past, he has learned to exercise that piety which Mr. Richard Weaver has praised as the virtue most needed in the modern world. Thus it is that in the moment of self-consciousness, the Southern writer is able to bring to bear not only his personal view but also the total metaphysic of his society.

But "metaphysic" is a philosophical term. And Richard Weaver has noted, quite correctly, that the South does not go in for philosophy in a formal and systematic way. The Southern philosophy is more of a religion than philosophy. In fact, it is the Old-Time Religion that, in the familiar song, "was good for Paul and Silas/And it's good enough

for me!" Richard Weaver, in the article to which I have been referring, puts it another way but means the same thing.

Weaver says that the Southerner's nature is to distrust analysis. "It is his habit to see things as forms or large configurations, and he senses that the process of breaking these down (which is nearly always carried on for some practical purpose) somehow proves fatal to the truth of the whole." And the Southerner in this natural preference is in line with a great tradition. "We have only to recall," says Weaver, "that in the achievements of the world's cultures, the work of analysis is fairly late and is somehow specialized. The form in which the messages of the great religions come...is seldom, if ever, analytical... The evidence is overwhelming that synthesis is the way of religion and art and that analysis is the way of science and business, and this distinction underlies a wide range of Southern attitudes and choices. The typical Southerner is an authentically religious being if one means by religion not a neat set of moralities but a deep and even frightening intuition of man's radical dependence in this world...it causes him to demur at the analysis of life, or love, or war, or any other large subject. What he wants is a picture of it, in which the whole is somehow greater than the analyzable parts."

Or—if I might now make application of this view—if the South from the time of the Reconstruction of 1865-1876 had universally adopted and applied the views then prevailing at the North—if the South had destroyed its traditional society, utterly and forthwith, and lost all historical consciousness, there would have been no such writers as have today excited Mr. Vann Woodward's attention. If in this new Reconstruction that we are now enduring, a hundred years after the first, we should accept and apply the advice being given by the new apostles of discontinuity and destruction, we shall have no more writers like Faulkner, Tate, Cabell, Glasgow, Warren, Ransom, Katherine Anne Porter (to name but a few); but our novelists will be the fiction-writing parallels of Ralph McGill and Harry Ashmore, and

our poets of some new Beatnik school will be practicing their Southern versions of *Howl*.

Instead of such degeneration, we have come—as I said back in 1950—"to the moment of self-consciousness…the moment when a writer awakes to realize what he and his people truly are, in comparison with what they are being urged to become." And what does this mean? It means that the Southerner (or any other member of a traditional society, even a fragment of one) does not have to labor to learn some things. We already know, from the start, *who we are, where we are, where we belong, what we live by, what we live for*. That priceless inheritance is something given to us. But in the thoroughly modernized, anti-traditional society, it is not given; it can be achieved, if at all, only after long struggle. It is exactly what the apostles of the new Reconstruction, in the pseudoscientific language of the modern power-state, are saying we must not have, must give up if we do have it.

But we have not given it up. And so our moments of self-consciousness may become moments of deepest remembrance that lead to the life of the imagination—the poem, the story, the play, the novel. Yet the writer's imagination only brings into significant form the life of our people who have cherished, through long tradition and rich custom, what makes such imagination possible. In 1903 the great Irish writer, William Butler Yeats, wrote this of the people of the Galway plains:

> There is still in truth upon these great level plains a people, a community bound together by imaginative possessions, by poems and stories which have grown out of its own life, and by a past of great passions which can still waken the heart to imaginative action. One could still, if one had the genius, and had been born Irish, write for these people plays and poems like those of Greece… England or any other country which takes its tunes from the great cities and gets its taste from schools and not from old custom, may have a mob, but it cannot have a people… A people alone are a great

river, and where a people has died, a nation is about to die. (The Galway Plains)

So said Yeats, and what he said came true for Ireland and for William Butler Yeats. Between the Ireland of Yeats and the South of the past three or four decades, there is, I would say, a stirring likeness. We, too, have been and still are a community bound together by imaginative possessions—a people that has not yet died, a community that, though shaken, battered, and maimed, still lives as a community. What binds us together is, in some considerable measure, what bound the Irish people through the centuries. I remember the very words of the Irish poet George William Russell (Æ), a friend of Yeats, when he stood before a Nashville audience many years ago—the ladies of the Centennial Club and their guests who had come together to surprise Russell with a birthday celebration in his honor. "I will tell you," said he (in a fine impromptu speech after the presentation of the birthday cake), "why Ireland has a great literature. Because we were poor; because we were backward; because we were downtrodden and oppressed; because we loved our country; because we were religious." And, hearing that beloved poet as he towered before us with his great brown beard and mighty shoulders, I felt then as I feel now, that he might be speaking for Tennessee, for Virginia, for all the besieged, invaded South, no less than for County Sligo, the River Shannon, Dublin, Tara's halls.

I tell you what I know by word of mouth as much as by paper and print. I am led to remember how stories and poems start, when they spring from that moment of self-consciousness to which I have referred. What passes from memory to memory, without benefit of the historian's record, is as old in time as the memories that it expresses, and if it is accepted it endures as long as the land and people that accept it.

A section of *The Tall Men*—which I first published in 1927—is by this measure about a hundred years old, for it embodies what my

grandmother told me—my grandmother who was a girl in her late teens, in Chapel Hill, Tennessee, during the Federal occupation of the eighteen-sixties. She saw her young friends, Confederate soldiers in uniform, captured and shot down in cold blood by Federal troopers. She saw them lined up by the roadside, and the rifles levelled. She heard the shots and saw them fall—all but one who broke away and ran—and then was shot, too. She helped "lay out" the bodies for burial. And she told me about it one day when I was a child at her home. Later, when I was endeavoring to define, in a series of long poems, the relationship of a modern Southerner to his past, I remembered what my grandmother had told me and made it part of a poem ("The Sod of Battlefields," in *The Tall Men*).

All of us in the South do a great deal of this kind of remembering, within the circle of family and close friends. With a little help from written records—family papers, books, all that we somehow accumulate—we project our memories far back. In another poem of mine ("Hermitage"), in which I try to visualize a colonial ancestor, I deal with this process of memory:

> I cannot see him plain, that far-off sire
> Who notched the first oak on this western hill.
> And the bronze tablet cannot tell what fire
> —Urging the deep bone back to the viking wave—
> Kindled his immigrant eye and drove his will.
> But in the hearthside tale his rumor grows
> As voice to voice into the folk-chain melts
> And clamor of danger brings the lost kin close.

To see how the folk-chain of memory binds us together and comes into dramatic being in story or novel at some unexpected moment, I would offer Andrew Lytle's novel *The Long Night* as a distinguished example. From Mr. Lytle's own account, we know that the idea of the novel came to him from a Southern historian, his good friend, the late Frank Lawrence Owsley. In a prologue to the novel, written in the

form of a letter in August 1936, and printed with the book, Mr. Lytle says:

Frank Owsley, Esquire
Dear Frank:

It has been over a year now since you told me the story of your Uncle Dink. You had stopped over at Cornsilk, you will remember, on your way to South Alabama, and we were sitting on the porch in the cool of the evening waiting for supper. It would be hard to say exactly what started you on the history of his exploits. It may have been that your journey to the old neighborhood brought it to mind. But I like to think that stories come naturally at such a time and at such a place, for certainly if it be true that the crowded town is necessary to the arts as a place where the artist may mingle with other artists and learn the conscious practice of his craft, I am sure it is no less true that but for the country there would be few good stories left to tell.

The question of form, of course arises, and with it, theories of art and the disciplines and techniques demanded by the arts. But here I am speaking about the richness of the sources of art that we command because of the long presence in the South of a traditional community where, as Mr. Lytle says, "stories come naturally...the tall tales of a winter's evening or the discussion through the hot afternoon of the idiosyncrasies of some kinsman, now long dead."

What comes naturally in the South and in the Ireland of Yeats may be difficult elsewhere. But we know from the example of T.S. Eliot that the historical consciousness may be highly valued and ardently cultivated, eventually with distinguished results, even though the society in which the writer emerges is not much more than the "Waste Land" of Eliot's famous poem—that is to say, a civilization that is over-civilized and on the downgrade, decadent, no longer in any true sense a society. Very likely the realization—or revelation—that his society has become or is becoming a "waste land" is what impels a writer like Eliot to develop or seek to develop historical

consciousness, in order that he may better function as an artist and, in redeeming himself, also do something toward redeeming his barren society. But in the end, there is no redemption without religion. That is as true for Eliot as for all others, as his career proves. Note that first, he approaches his problem by way of literary tradition as such, in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," published in 1919, a year after the close of World War I. In that same year of 1919 Yeats composed his remarkable poem, "The Second Coming—surely one of the greatest modern poems—with its prophetic lines:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

Eliot, thinking at first of the literary problem in a rather secular way, declares that tradition "cannot be inherited. If you want it you must obtain it by great labor." Here is the central, often-quoted passage of his essay:

> It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

Observe that Eliot says the writer must feel that the literary tradition of Western civilization, from Homer on, exists in his own

present. He does not say that a writer must at every turn display his knowledge of that literature, as misguided imitators of Eliot have sometimes seemed to think. It is the feeling in the bones that counts. That is what Eliot says. And that is the way the South thinks about the past. It is the way the Southern writers praised by Mr. Woodward evidently think. But it seems clear that Eliot himself did not at first have that feeling. He had to struggle to acquire it—to cultivate in himself what ought to have come as an inheritance. what the Southern writers already had by a kind of natural right. To ally himself with tradition, Eliot, born in St. Louis of New England Unitarian stock, had to go from New England to Old England, renounce his American citizenship, and become a British citizen. In his critical essays and, much more dramatically, in his poems, from *The Waste Land* through *The Hollow Men* and *Ash Wednesday*, to his *Four Quartets*, we may trace his long and painful Pilgrim's Progress, his spiritual and artistic struggle to "redeem the time"—that is, to achieve his purpose, openly declared in 1928, to be "classicist in literature, royalist in politics [by which he meant "temperate conservatism"], and Anglo-Catholic in religion." And now—the poet who seemed unintelligible in the nineteen-twenties has become teacher, leader, and sage for two generations of artists and intellectuals. Eliot the poet, not very long ago, spoke to an audience of 16,000 in a stadium in Minnesota. Eliot the dramatist has restored verse to the theatre; he has conquered Broadway. The voice of Eliot the Anglo-Catholic in religion, the conservative in politics, the classicist in literature is heard throughout the world.

I am proposing—in fact, I am insisting—through reference to these notable examples, Yeats in Ireland, Eliot in England and America—that we of the South have great allies, great comrades in our sense of tradition that elsewhere, if it existed, has been lost through neglect or deliberately destroyed, or (worst fate of all) vulgarized by cheap commercialism. The renewal of belief, the sense of belonging, the blessing of true community—qualities nourished in a

traditional society, are our most precious assets. Without them, literature declines and dies. It is the new traditionalists—Yeats, Eliot, some of the Southern writers, and others like them—who are the only substantial counterforce in our time to decadent realism, decadent naturalism, cheap and often vicious sensationalism.

It may seem that I have said too little of the "old-time religion," but that is surely something that needs little explanation to a Southern audience. There are numerous ways in which it acts upon literature. One of the most obvious and notable is the recovery, in the novels of Faulkner and Warren in particular, of the idea of man as an imperfect creature possessing free will, capable of choosing between good and evil regardless of heredity and environment, an individual responsible in the end for his spiritual condition. This means, among other things, that the novel in the hands of such writers can take on tragic dimensions. There is no shifting of blame to society as guilty party, as Theodore Dreiser seems to shift it in his large novel that he misnames *An American Tragedy*. Determinism of the sort practiced by Zola and his modern successors has virtually no place in Southern fiction or poetry. Faulkner's rejection of the Rousseauistic—and now socialistic—idea of man as innately good has received much critical discussion, as has the general Southern assumption of "original sin," whether taken in a Calvinistic or other meaning, and I will not dwell on this topic.

I prefer the more affirmative approach used by Louise Cowan in her recent discussion of "The '*Pietas*' in Southern Poetry," especially a passage in which, summarizing Christopher Dawson, she notes that "as a community adapts itself to a way of life a conciliation of the divine and the human orders may be effected within it."

> In such a society [she writes] economic, moral, and aesthetic patterns, transformed by a kind of grace, lose their exclusively secular character and begin to assume a sacredness within the community; and loyalty between members of the community rests on this essentially metaphysical basis. Men do not bow to each other but to the divine as it manifests itself in their

communal life. Such an attitude is what the Romans called *pietas*, reverence before the gods and one's ancestors. It is not a conception very likely to be understood today. Nevertheless, one might conceivably argue that any genuine culture possesses this *pietas*, and possesses it with good reason; it represents a people's awareness of the twofold nature of human society.

If the other view mentioned—that places man as a free agent capable of either good or evil, and responsible for his choice between them—if that view makes possible the writing of tragic works, this second view allows for the high comedy that is the counterpart of tragedy. But I am here interested in emphasizing the fact that in the traditional society described by Mrs. Cowan, even economic objects take on something of a sacred character. The divine element is thus interfused throughout the human and secular element, not separated from it. And this gives a basis for everyday manners, for the domestic and utilitarian arts, for common human intercourse no less than for public architecture, whether civil or religious, and the ritual of divine worship itself.

Finally, there is that aspect of Southern religiousness that is truly first in order of importance; submission to the mystery of life and the will of God. *Remember thy Creator*. For generation after generation, these words from the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes have been bedded deep in the mind and soul of the South. From this piety arises the Southerner's acceptance of nature as in the last analysis, inscrutable and unconquerable—as Richard Weaver so happily says: "not something to make over or change; it is something for him to come to terms with."

The world is God-given [writes Weaver]; its mysteries are not supposed to be fully revealed; and the only possible course in the long run is to accommodate oneself to its vast pulsations. Thus nature is seen as providential, and even its harsher aspects must be regarded as having ends that we do not fully comprehend. In a word, the Southerner reveres original creation... [For this reason] the Yankee's effort to become complete master

of his environment appears to the Southerner an effrontery, is not going to be improved by busy human schemes.

The Northerner, in contrast, as Weaver points out, is "a child of the Enlightenment…his religion is to do good, and his own mind his church." This tendency leads, of course, to an opposition between "works" and "faith." The Northerner chooses "works" and judges things, people, institutions by that standard. The Southerner, while not altogether neglecting "works," leans strongly toward "faith" in his preference—if "faith" and "works" are to be set in opposition. As a Christian, he is pretty much of an Old Testament man and mixes a good deal of Hebraism with his Hellenism and his devout Christianity. There are certain material and political disadvantages in this emphasis, especially in times when "liberalism" has come to mean looseness in all departments of life. But—again I refer to Richard Weaver—what the South loses by remembering its Creator as well as its history, it gains in its freedom from the sin of envy: "It is not in [the Southerner's] character to hate another man because that man has a great deal more of the world's goods than he has or is ever likely to have. He is not now and never has been a leveller… From his point of view, there is nothing written in the original bill of things which says that the substance of the world must be distributed equally… The modern impulse which elevates envy into a principle of social action…is thus completely foreign to his tradition."

This being a deeply founded Southern trait, it should be easy to understand why trade unionism has not been favored in the South as in the North, and much light is shed upon the South's strong resistance to integration of the races. It is not the kind of light, however, that we may expect the government at Washington to see as long as this country tolerates the present Supreme Court and others in high office, blinded by their own conceit.

That blindness goes far back in history. For illustrative purposes, I shall here place it only as far back as March 4, 1933. In that spring season of thirty-three years ago, my wife and I, with our

thirteen-year-old daughter, were in effect "refugees" in Marshallville, Georgia, after a siege of disaster during the hard times of the Great Depression. We were in Marshallville as the guests, more or less, of my friend the late John Donald Wade and his mother, Ida Frederick Wade. And on the March day of 1933, Miss Ida had invited us to sit by the fire in her great old house and listen to the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as President of the United States. We heard the bugles play the President's March, and we heard that voice, soon to become so famous, say, among other things: "You have nothing to fear but fear itself!" Those were words, I believe, that could not possibly have occurred to any true Southerner to say on that occasion or any occasion. For he would have known from childhood that there are certain fears we cannot do without, and most of all in times of tribulation and crisis, the one remembered from the ending of the lesson in the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes: "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."

The saying of Roosevelt is the glib slogan of the Social Welfare State when the center no longer holds and modern bureaucracy takes over all power. The faith of the South, which rests on the fear of God, is what makes a people great. It is the only center that holds.

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